

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: SHUM, PINT, BL
SUBJ: BOLIVIAN HUNGER STRIKE TESTS GOB

1. SUMMARY: THE HUNGER STRIKE BEGUN BY FOUR BOLIVIAN WIVES
ON DECEMBER 29, IN SUPPORT OF WIDENED POLITICAL AMNESTY,
RESTORATION OF FREE LABOR UNIONS AND OTHER DEMANDS HAS
BEEN GROWING STEADILY IN STRENGTH WITH MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED
STUDENTS, TRADE UNIONISTS AND MINERS WIVES ACROSS COUNTRY
JOINING THE EFFORT. GOB HAS BEEN UNABLE TO NEGOTIATE
AN END TO THE STRIKE, WHICH IT HAS ATTACKED AS "SUBVERSIVE".
PRESIDENT BANZER IS REPORTEDLY VERY UPSET BY THE STRIKE
AND TOLD A GROUP OF NEWS REPORTERS, THAT CONTINUATION OF
EXTREMISTS AGITATION COULD CALL JULY ELECTIONS INTO QUESTION. EMBASSY
UNDERSTANDS THAT BANZER HAS NAMED A SMALL HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION
TO PREPARE A REPORT ON WHETHER THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS
SHOULD CONTINUE AND IF SO, IN WHAT FORM. ADDING TO
BANZER'S WOES IS A STATEMENT PUBLISHED ON JANUARY 8,
BY A GROUP OF PROMINENT RETIRED MILITARY OFFICERS, CALLING
ON THE MILITARY NOT TO BECOME INVOLVED IN THE ELECTION
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PROCESS. END SUMMARY.

2. THE STRIKE BEGAN DECEMBER 29 WHEN TWO WIVES OF BOLIVIAN
MINERS IN EXILE AND TWO WIVES OF BOLIVIAN MINERS FIRED
FROM THEIR JOBS BY COMIBOL, THE STATE MINING COMPANY,
SAT DOWN OUTSIDE THE OFFICE OF CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOP OF LA PAZ
AND ANNOUNCED A HUNGER STRIKE IN SUPPORT OF FOUR DEMANDS:

1) A GENERAL AND UNRESTRICTED AMNESTY FOR ALL PRISONERS, EXILES, "RESIDENCIAMIENTOS" (FOR EXPLANATION SEE 77 LA PAZ 9459) AND THOSE PERSECUTED ON POLITICAL OR TRADE UNION GROUNDS; 2) RESTORATION TO THEIR JOBS OF ALL MINERS FIRED BY COMIBOL FOR POLITICAL OR LABOR ACTIVITY REASONS SINCE JUNE 9, 1976; 3) RESTORATION OF TRADE UNION LIBERTIES; AND, 4) WITHDRAWAL OF ALL MILITARY TROOPS PRESENTLY OCCUPYING AREAS IN OR NEAR MINING CAMPS.

3. SINCE THEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, TRADE UNIONISTS, AND MORE WIVES HAVE JOINED STRIKE WHICH IS NOW CONTINUING IN SIX DIFFERENT LOCATIONS IN LA PAZ, INCLUDING UNIVERSITY OF SAN ANDRES, AS WELL AS IN COCHABAMBA, ORURO AND POTOSI. TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE PARTICIPAING IN HUNGER STRIKE IS ESTIMATED BY PRESS AT MORE THAN 200. IN ADDITION NUMEROUS GROUPS HAVE EXPRESSED THEIR SUPPORT, INCLUDING THE PERMANENT ASSEMBLY ON HUMAN RIGHTS (WHICH IS REPORTEDLY DOING SOME ORGANIZING), NATIONAL PRESS-RADIO ASSOCIATION, VARIOUS TRADE UNIONS, AND GROUPS OF BOLIVIAN EXPATRIATES. THE ILLEGAL, BUT STILL FUNCTIONING LABOR FEDERATION OF BOLIVIAN MINERS, HAS THREATENED A MINER'S STRIKE IF THE HUNGER STRIKE IS NOT SETTLED WHITHIN 48 HOURS.

4. THE STRIKE HAS ALSO RECEIVED SUPPORT FROM FORMER BOLIVIAN PRESIDENT LUIS ADOLFO SILES SALINAS WHO HAS BEEN PROPOSED AS SPOKESMAN FOR THE STRIKERS AND FROM FORMER PRESIDENT HERNAN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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SILES ZUAZO AND MIR LEADER ANTONIO ARANIBAR QUIROGA, BOTH PRESENTLY LIVING IN CARACAS.

5. THE GOB SO FAR HAS BEEN UNABLE TO NEGOTIATE A SOLUTION. AT FIRST IT IGNORED THE STRIKE, BUT WHEN IT GREW MINISTER OF INTERIOR JIMENEZ OPTIMISTICALLY STATED THE STRIKE WOULD BE SETTLED SOON AND ANNOUNCED 15 MORE INDIVIDUALS HAD BEEN GRANTED AMNESTY, BUT WITHOUT ANNOUNCING ANY NAMES. JIMENEZ ALSO TRIED TO APPEASE THE FOUR STRIKING WOMEN WHO HAD BEGUN THE HUNGER STRIKE BY PROMISING TO RESOLVE THEIR INDIVIDUAL GRIEVANCES. WHEN THE WOMEN REJECTED HIS OFFER AND DEMANDED INSTEAD "JUSTICE FOR ALL" JIMENEZ BEGAN DENOUNCING THE STRIKE AS A WELL-PLANNED SUBVERSION BY LEFTIST EXTREMISTS". HE HAS SINCE THREATENED TO CLOSE THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN ANDRES IN LA PAZ.

6. APPARENTLY FRUSTRATED BY STRIKERS' PERSISTENCE AND ITS GROWING STRENGTH, PRESIDENT BANZER LASHED OUT AT STRIKERS WHILE TALKING WITH PRESS REPORTERS ON JANUARY 6 AND CALLED THE STRIKE A "MAJOR EXTREMIST CONSPIRACY". ASKED BY THE PRESS WHETHER THE CONSTITUTIONALIZATION PROCESS COULD BE INTERRUPTED BANZER REPLIED, "IF THE PEOPLE REQUEST IT, WE HAVE THE OBLIGATION TO ACCEDE TO THEIR WILL."

7. BANZER CLAIMED THAT HIS OPPOSITION IS RESORTING TO DEVICES LIKE THE HUNGER STRIKE BECAUSE THEY COULD NOT BRING THE PEOPLE OUT INTO THE STREETS TO SUPPORT THEM AS THE PRO-BANZER AND PRO-PEREDA FORCES HAD DONE THAT SAME DAY IN LA PAZ IN AN ORGANIZED DEMONSTRATION OF SUPPORT FOR THE GOVERNMENT. BANZER CHALLENGED THE OPPOSITION TO ORGANIZE A DEMONSTRATION ANY PLACE "WITH ALL GUARANTEES GIVEN", APPARENTLY FORGETTING THAT ONLY TWO WEEKS AGO RIOT POLICE HAD BROKEN UP A UNIVERSITY STUDENT MARCH IN LA PAZ SUPPORTING A WIDER POLITICAL AMNESTY.

8. REGARDING THE AMNESTY, BANZER STATED THAT JIMENEZ HAD ALREADY SAID THAT THE AMNESTY MUST BE PROGRESSIVE, "BUT I WANT TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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STATE THAT JUST AS THERE CAN BE MORE PEOPLE AMNESTIED, IF THE CONSPIRACY CONTINUES, THE LIST (PRESUMABLY OF BOLIVIANS HAVING TO LIVE IN EXILE) COULD BE INCREASED ENORMOUSLY."

9. EMBASSY UNDERSTANDS BANZER WAS FURTHER UPSET BY THE PUBLICATION IN JANUARY 8 PRESS OF A "CALL TO UNITY" SIGNED BY A GROUP OF 12 RETIRED MILITARY OFFICERS INCLUDING COL. JOSE PATINO AYOROA AND GEN JUAN AROYOA AYAROA (CONSIDERED PERENNIAL PLOTTERS). THE GROUP, CALLING ITSELF TOPATER, THE NAME OF A BATTLE SITE IN THE WAR OF THE PACIFIC, CALLS ON THE MILITARY TO ABSTAIN COMPLETELY FROM THE 1978 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND ESPECIALLY NOT TO SUPPORT A MILITARY CANDIDATE IN THE ELECTIONS.

10. COMMENT: WE UNDERSTAND FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE THAT BANZER IS PERSONALLY VERY UPSET BY THE SPREADING HUNGER STRIKE AND DURING THE JANUARY 6 CABINET MEETING HE ASSIGNED THE MINISTERS OF INTERIOR, FINANCE AND LABOR PLUS THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF PRESS AND INFORMATION TO DO A QUICK REPORT ON WHETHER THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS SHOULD CONTINUE. CLEARLY THE GOB IS PUZZLED ABOUT HOW TO HANDLE THIS FIRST SERIOUS CHALLENGE TO ITS AUTHORITY SINCE DEMOCRATIZATION PLANS WERE ANNOUNCED IN NOVEMBER. THE OUTCOME WILL DEMONSTRATE WHETHER THE GOB IS PREPARED TO TOLERATE THE ROUGH AND TUMBLE OF AN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN, BOLIVIAN STYLE.
BOEKER

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